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## Notes on Philippine birds, 7. Recent records of the Chinese Egret *Egretta eulophotes* from Luzon, Mindoro and Palawan, Philippines.

by Stephen E. Gast & Ben King

Received 13 April 1985

The Chinese Egret *Egretta eulophotes* is considered a rare winter visitor to the Philippines by duPont (1971). Amadon (1951) records it as casual from Bohol, Cebu, Panay and Samar; Baud (1978) from Palawan; and Kuroda (1913) from Basilan. Reported here are first records for the islands of Mindoro and Luzon and additional records from Palawan.

### MINDORO.

S.E.G. observed a single *E. eulophotes* on 9 April 1981 and 3 on 22 April 1981 in a large estuarine area of fish ponds and salt farms at Barrio Caminawit, Municipality of San Jose, Occidental Mindoro. The 9 April bird (observed at 50 m) was with a large mixed flock of Little Egrets *Egretta garzetta* and Great Egrets *E. alba*. On 22 April, 3 Chinese Egrets (observed at 40 m) were together on the perimeter of a flock of c. 50 Great Egrets and 8 Little Egrets, foraging in open water 10-15 cm deep, constantly "dancing" with high quick steps and with wings frequently extended or occasionally flapping. This behaviour is reminiscent of the feeding method of the Reddish Egret *E. rufescens* of the Gulf of Mexico in North America, and may be a useful field characteristic in recognising Chinese Egrets in large mixed flocks, particularly when not in breeding plumage. All these Chinese Egrets had well developed shaggy crest plumes, all-yellow bills and blackish legs with greenish-yellow feet. Due to the excellent viewing conditions on 22 April, the bluish facial skin, a species-diagnostic feature, was clearly seen on each of the 3 birds.

## LUZON, Batangas Province

On 1 April 1983, S.E.G. watched 7 Chinese Egrets at one of 2 large solitary fish ponds c. 2.5 km SSE of Barrio Matabungkay, Province of Batangas, Luzon. At a distance of 20 m, all field marks, including the bluish facial skin, were clearly visible on all 7 birds. Also present in the same feeding group were 25 Little Egrets, 2 (one white phase and one dark phase) Pacific Reef Egrets *E. sacra*, and nearby, 5 Grey Herons *Ardea cinerea*. It was noted that the white phase Pacific Reef Egret had decidedly greener legs, much shorter crest plumes and a coarser, less elegant appearance than the Chinese Egrets. Only 5 Chinese Egrets and 15 Little Egrets were at the pond on 2 April 1983. Both visits were made during extreme high tide.

## LUZON, Nueva Ecija Province

On 23 April 1983, S.E.G. and others sighted 8 Chinese Egrets with 2 Cattle Egrets *Bubulcus ibis* c. 6 km NE of San Jose, Province of Nueva Ecija where the Talavera River emerges from the foothills of the Central Cordillera of Luzon. This point is c. 30 km downstream south of Dalton Pass, a well known focal point for the passage of migratory birds. All 10 birds were closely grouped in a corner of a planted rice paddy. From 5 km, well developed crest plumes, yellow bills and black legs were seen on the 8 birds, but there was low cloud cover and high gusty winds and we did not approach the birds to see their yellow feet or recognise bluish facial skin.

## PALAWAN

On 18 April 1983, a flock of 28 Chinese Egrets was observed from c. 50 m on the beach off the end of the runway of the Puerto Princesa Airport, Province of Palawan by B.K. and others. Twelve of the egrets were in full breeding plumage, the rest in winter plumage. Next day, only 6 Chinese Egrets remained. (Field notes for these sightings are on file at the American Museum of Natural History in New York.) Subsequent sightings in the same area included a single Chinese Egret on 9 May 1983 and again on 20 May 1983.

COMMENTS. In his discussion, Amadon (1951) mentions the possibility that the Chinese Egret may be resident in the Philippines. Although these records do not support or refute this possibility, the presence of 8 birds on Luzon in a known migration pathway, in a rice paddy well inland, which is apparently not the preferred habitat, does suggest that they were migrants. However, in view of the repeated sightings of Chinese Egrets in Mindoro in April and in Palawan in April and May, we believe these areas should be investigated for possible breeding localities, as well as for favoured wintering localities. Both areas provide extensive suitable habitat with relatively low human population densities. One possible egret breeding colony (or possibly only a roost site?) was spotted during a helicopter flight over Mangarin Bay SSE of San Jose, Occidental Mindoro. This was situated on a small isolated mangrove island (c. 30 x 50 m) in the south central portion of the tidal basin and contained 150 or more white egrets.

*Acknowledgements:* The authors wish to thank Robert S. Kennedy and Edward C. Dickinson for their review and comments concerning this paper, as well as Joanne Burger, Jennifer Burris, Tony Clark, Tim Fisher, Michael Gochfeld, Stuart Keith, Doug McWhirter, Karl Overman, John Wahl and Ian Whitehouse for their part in these observations.

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## A second specimen of *Mirafra (Heteromirafra) sidamoensis* Erard

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Received 1 July 1985

An expedition by the Paris Museum to Ethiopia collected an unknown lark within 2 km south of Negelli (5°20'N, 39°35'E), Borana, in Sidamo Province, on 18 May 1968, this being the only specimen seen in 2 visits to the area (a second expedition unsuccessfully sought the bird in October and November 1971). The specimen was described by Erard (1975) as a new species, *Mirafra (Heteromirafra) sidamoensis*.

On 15 April 1974, one of us (J.S.A.), unaware of the French finding, collected a male lark with well-developed testes (7 x 4 mm), weighing 30.2 g, at 12 km southeast of Negelli at 5°16'N, 39°42'E. It bore a superficial resemblance to a Flappet Lark *Mirafra rufocinnamomea*, although it was paler than the very dark chestnut birds with which J.S.A. was familiar in western Ethiopia (specimens of which were identified later as *M.r. tigrina*, a subspecies previously unknown in Ethiopia). The specimen keyed out as *M. rufocinnamomea* in Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1955), and because it was paler than the west Ethiopian birds previously seen by J.S.A., and which were assumed to be *M.r. rufocinnamomea* (the only form then known in the northern part of the country), it was thought possibly to be an example of the southern race *M.r. torrida*. However, there was no comparative material available in Ethiopia, so the specimen was sent to the Smithsonian Institution for identification.

Unfortunately the bird was not looked at again until October 1977, so that it was not available to Erard when he described his specimen. His opinion was that the existing knowledge of the genus *Heteromirafra* was insufficient to warrant splitting it off from *Mirafra*, so that he named his bird *Mirafra sidamoensis* and suggested that it should be one of a superspecies with *M. ruddi* of South West Africa and *M. archeri* of northern Somalia (formerly British Somaliland), and closer to the latter. We agree that *sidamoensis* is clearly close to *archeri*, and consider that such a distinctive allopatric form as *sidamoensis* should continue to be regarded as a separate species.

Erard (1975) has discussed already the affinities of the 3 members of this superspecies and their remarkably restricted ranges, so that it is only necessary